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The Origin and Function of the Gypsy Image in Children's Literature

Ian Hancock

Gypsies, or Romanies, have provided writers with a source of color since their very appearance in Europe in the Middle Ages. Black's *Gypsy Bibliography*, which includes nothing later than 1914, lists 351 novels, 199 plays, and 133 ballads in the English literary tradition alone, which have been written about or which feature Gypsy characters.

In children's literature, in Britain perhaps even more than in the United States, Gypsies turn up with some frequency — never as characters who happen incidentally also to be Gypsies, but *because* they are Gypsies, and because they serve a specific purpose. This purpose has, broadly speaking, three manifestations: the Gypsy as liar and thief either of property or (especially) of non-Gypsy children; the Gypsy as witch or caster of spells; and the Gypsy as romantic figure. In order to understand why the Gypsy should find him or herself in this mainly unflattering role, it is necessary first of all to understand what a Gypsy really is, and what historical circumstances have led to the emergence of so deeply-rooted a fictional image.

In the United States, which in fact has one of the highest Gypsy populations of any country in the world, Gypsies are often thought of as fantasy beings: journalist Randolph Conner writes of "witches, devils, ghosts, monsters, fairies, gypsies and other supernatural characters" celebrating Halloween (Conner); the Cooper Manufacturing Co. of New York includes a Gypsy with the witches and monsters which make up its line of Halloween costumes sold each year. Among those who know that Gypsies are actual people, there is the widespread idea that they are a social, or a behavioral population like hippies or tramps, rather than an ethnic group. There are many references in the literature to individuals *becoming* Gypsies by joining such a group or adopting a stylized way of life.

Gypsies, or more properly Romanies or Rom, share a common origin in ninth-century India. Evidence for this is abundant, whether linguistic, historical, cultural, or anthropomorphic. Leaving India at the time of (and probably because of) the Indo-Persian wars, the original population found itself in the Byzantine Empire by the tenth or eleventh century, and by the fourteenth century had been pushed

up into southeastern Europe on the crest of the encroaching Turkish invasion.

The Europe in which those early Gypsies found themselves was a land in turmoil. The Muslims were preventing access to the eastern trade routes and to the Holy Land; the economy and Christendom were both threatened, and the Crusades had depleted the manpower drastically. Gypsies, being dark-skinned, unfamiliar in language and dress, and coming from the east, were thought to be Muslims themselves. Even today, they are called "Tatars" or "Heidens" or "Turks" in some parts of Europe, and the very word "Gypsy" derives from "Egyptian," a medieval label vaguely applied to any exotic eastern peoples.

Because of their mistakenly-acquired identity, and because they lacked a country and military or political strength, Gypsies could not satisfactorily convince the Europeans that they were not part of the Islamic invasion. Thus, they soon became the target of cruel persecution. In southern Europe, due to their metalworking skills, they were made the property of the state in Moldavia and Wallachia and they became slaves, a condition which lasted for five centuries until its abolition in the middle of the last century (Hancock, *The Pariah Syndrome*). Elsewhere, laws were passed making it illegal even to be born a Gypsy. Those caught were mutilated and hanged. Later, huge numbers were rounded up and transported to work in the colonies overseas, in India and Africa as well as in the Americas. There were Gypsies with Christopher Columbus on his third voyage to Hispaniola in 1498 (Wilford), and the first to reach North America arrived in 1664, banished from England by Oliver Cromwell.

Prejudice against Gypsies became embedded in the attitudes and eventually in the folklore of European culture. Unable to defend themselves, easily recognized in large groups, Gypsies learned to stay away from urban areas and to travel in small numbers, denying whenever possible their very identity as Gypsies. They were people who moved around the edges of European society, forced to poach or beg because shopkeepers would not deal with them, and to make a living using skills and equipment that could travel with them: dealing in horses, or mending metal utensils, or fortune-telling, for example. The last gave this victimized population a small measure of power over the superstitious European peasantry, but in turn it contributed to the perception of Gypsies as practitioners of the occult, and increased the fear of them. Because Gypsies were prevented from attending school, Gypsy cultures have developed as non-literate cultures, and this per-

sists to this day. After the abolition of slavery, the ex-slave-owners were compensated by the government for their loss but nothing was done to reorient the newly-freed Gypsies (Blaramberg 802). Thus, the population of some 600,000 uneducated and penniless, was left to survive as best it could. Everywhere throughout Europe they encountered the anti-Gypsy laws which operated against the non-enslaved Romani population. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, many Gypsies managed to enter the United States — illegally, because the immigration department routinely refused their admission, having inherited attitudes and laws from Europe; today, the majority of American Gypsies descend from that exodus, and number several hundred thousand.

These facts contrast very sharply with the literary image of the Gypsy, who travels in a carved and painted horse-drawn wagon,¹ camps in a wooded glade where he cooks hedgehogs over an open fire while his women dance barefoot nearby with tambourines. This is an attractive picture, however unrealistic, and its appeal in children's literature is understandable. Together with an exotic outward appearance and mode of living, their very way of life is seen as the embodiment of freedom: freedom from responsibility, from attendance to hygiene, from conventionally moral behavior, freedom to travel wherever fancy directs, freedom from material encumbrance, and from nine-to-five routine. The facts are, however, very different, as I have tried to show. Gypsies have been persecuted for centuries, culminating in Hitler's attempted extermination of the entire population during the Second World War; about the same proportion of Gypsies was destroyed as Jews — between 70% and 80%; but this fact is not well known to the world, partly because, being scattered and in the main illiterate, Gypsies have not had the means to bring attention to their situation.

This same lack of means has allowed the fictional image to flourish unchecked. Whereas, in recent years, other ethnic minorities have begun to monitor their portrayal in literature and the popular press, and have curbed excessive stereotyping, Gypsies have not so far been able to do so effectively. The idyllic, rural image which American literature has inherited from Britain can be traced to the Victorian period and earlier, when a disenchanted middle class English population, probably as a reaction to increasing industrialization, found an outlet in accounts of simpler, more primitive folk. Like other groups strange to the English, Gypsies have been romanticized, feared, and denigrated. Victorian novels and weekly journals were full of the most

condescending accounts of American Indians, or Africans, or Pacific Islanders. The British Empire was offered as living proof of the superiority of the white race; published essays debating the inequality of one branch of humanity with another flourished. But Gypsies were special: they were *there*. An article in the Victorian press from 1879 drew such a parallel:

. . . the gipsy encampment may be found, squatting within an hour's walk of the Royal palaces and luxurious town mansions of our nobility and opulent classes. . . . It is a curious spectacle in that situation, and might suggest a few serious reflections upon social contrasts at the centre and capital of the mighty British nation, which takes upon itself the correction of every savage tribe in South and West Africa and Central Asia. (Anon. 503)

In a feature article which appeared last year, one of the lawyers engaged by the U.S. Romani Council said that Gypsies were "the last group in the United States that the press can get away with discriminating against" (Dean). The same is true in fictional literature, though as with the press, the writers involved are usually not aware that they are guilty of such discrimination. It is not that the history of the Gypsies is especially mysterious, or that sources on the population are hard to find; the works of Sutherland or Gropper are serious anthropological and sociological studies, and are readily available; the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* devotes five pages to Romani Americans. But the *perceived* image of the Gypsy has a number of functions in the Euro-American cultural tradition, functions which outweigh the need for a more accurate representation of Gypsies and their history.

First, the Gypsy provides a useful body upon which one's fantasies may be projected. Janet Tompkins, a social worker who has worked closely with the central Californian Gypsy community, and who for several years helped operate the Romani school there, has commented on this. Noting that at least two thirds of her file of newspaper clippings concerning Gypsies deal with Gypsy kings and queens dying, while the balance involves swindles of various sorts, she concludes that the average non-Gypsy whose source of information is the press and children's storybooks is bound to get the impression that Gypsies are:

a bunch of thieves, and royal thieves at that, and what could be more romantic? This myth of royalty, especially in America, has a lot to do with romantic appeal, especially to young girls. After all, what are they raised on? Cinderella, Snow White, Beauty and the Beast and so on, and

they long to be princesses too. Perhaps they have to endure symbolic rags and tatters for a while, but one day Prince Charming will surely come along to carry them off to a castle. But where is the Prince? He's ridden off with Barbie Doll, leaving them with the Seven Dwarfs. It isn't fair — girls born to be princesses, and nobody to recognize the fact. But maybe they can get their ears pierced, wear gold earrings, put on scarves and long skirts, smear dirt on their faces and run away with the Gypsies, maybe meet a Gypsy prince with a knife between his teeth who will fight duels for them. Snow White never had it so good; such is the nonsense that girls' fantasies are made of. (Hancock, "Romance vs. Reality" 14)

Romani social structure does not include royalty; there are no Gypsy kings or queens, princes or princesses; these, like the association with Halloween, have been projected onto the Gypsy image by non-Gypsies, who feel a need for such fantasy. At the end of a course I regularly offer on Gypsies, a student expressed some disappointment: she had learned a lot about Gypsies, she said, but they had now become real people for her. She preferred the imaginary Gypsies she carried with her before taking the class, and they'd been taken away from her.

The hypothesis that non-Gypsies actually *need* Gypsies as a source of fantasy was put forward in 1973 by Cohn; Sibley also believed the Gypsy image to be needed by non-Gypsies, as a contrasting yardstick by which to determine the parameters of non-Gypsy culture and its values. This approach, discussed by Erikson some years earlier, though not with specific reference to Gypsies, was summarized by Takaki: "One of the surest ways to confirm an identity, for communities as well as for individuals, is to find some way of measuring what one is not." A further explanation was put forward in 1982 by Kephart who, in a refinement of the notion of Gypsy as scapegoat, suggested that Romani culture is popularly seen as a counterculture, a threat to the establishment, and it is because of this that prejudice against Gypsies persists.

When we examine Gypsy references in the current literature aimed at children, whether fictional or not, we find that these stereotypes abound. In the summer of 1985, the *Detroit News* offered a competition for its paper carriers, "boys and girls aged 11 years and up," including the direction to "sell your sister and her cat to the Gypsies"; this came with a caricature of a Gypsy, complete with bandanna and earring, clutching a small boy. The Berkeley Publishing Group's *Dictionary 4*, an encyclopedic work of reference for children aged 10 to 12 and circulated through the school book program, defines "Gypsy" as

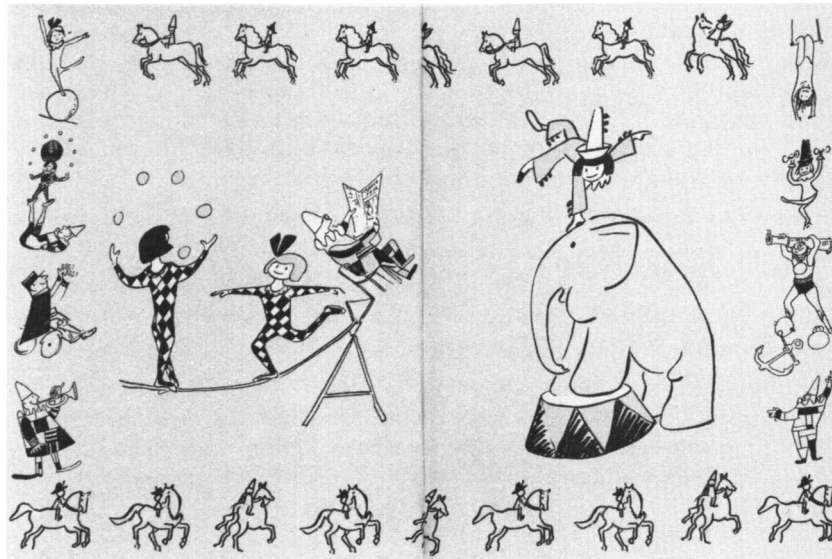
“a member of a wandering people who . . . usually have no permanent home”; despite the fact that only a tiny fraction of the world’s Gypsy population is today nomadic, the stereotype is reiterated in the definition. The word is invariably also denied a proper noun’s initial capital letter, although the lower case ‘g’ is the result of the loss of an original capital ‘E,’ and in its absence should be capitalized; the earliest form of the word in English was *Egyptian*. An examination of several other dictionaries and encyclopedias produced for children revealed similar treatments.

In fiction for children, the situation is equally misleading. In *The Ten O’Clock Club* by Carol Beach York, children dress up as Gypsies by putting rouge on their cheeks and wearing “odd” clothing, and become involved in a “gyp” (79). *Casey the Nomad* by Susan Sussman presents Gypsies in two of its stories in a demeaning and misleading way; the observation is made that “Gypsies lie. If they don’t lie, they’re not gypsy.” One would hardly expect to see, for instance, the statement that “Jews lie. If they don’t lie, they’re not Jewish.” But when Gypsies are involved, such a prejudicial text can slide right by the publishers’ evaluators. *Childcraft: The How and Why Library* includes a poem by Barbara Young entitled “Being a Gypsy,” in which a child “becomes” a Gypsy, by “wearing rough shoes,” “rings on [his] fingers” and “earrings in [his] ears.” The fact that there are Romani Americans who are doctors, teachers, actors, and politicians does not reach our children in the American school system. Perhaps the unkindest depiction of a Gypsy is found in Shel Silverstein’s very popular *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. Here a poem entitled “The Gypsies are coming” includes a drawing of a witchlike Gypsy woman carrying a sack full of children, and deals with Gypsies carrying them off:

“The gypsies are coming, the old people say,
to buy little children and take them away . . .
And kiddies, when they come to buy,
it won’t do any good to cry . . .”

A representative of the British-based National Gypsy Education Council wrote to Silverstein’s publisher, protesting the racism in the book. The letter included a poem by a (then) 11-year-old Gypsy girl, Julie Lee, to illustrate the feelings Gypsy children can experience from such bias:

My little brother goes to school
And the boys do bully him
And call him “Gypsy,” “Tramp”



The Gypsies taught them grace

And speed.

From *Madeline and the Gypsies*, written and illus. by Ludwig Bemelmans. © 1959 by Ludwig Bemelmans. Reprinted by permission of Viking Penguin Inc.

and "Thief"
And he's only eight
And cries at the night.

In Dayal Khalsa's *Tales of a Gambling Grandma*, written "for all the Khalsa children," the author repeats two special bits of advice given to her by her grandmother, who emigrated to the United States from Russia. The first was "Never, ever go into the woods alone because the gypsies will get you or, should you escape that cruel fate, you'll fall down a hole" (8). The passage is illustrated with a scene depicting Gypsies in a forest, with wagon, campfire, earrings and bandannas, hiding in the trees with ropes and hooks and other implements suitable for catching wayward children. In this kind of literature, earrings are especially important to the Gypsy identity. Even a cat can become a Gypsy, once fitted with an earring, as Betsy Byars shows in *Rama the Gypsy Cat*:

He was a young cat, but strong, and in his left ear he wore a tiny golden earring. The gypsy woman had put this in his ear when he was a

kitten, just as mothers place earrings in the pierced ears of gypsy babies. "Now," she had said, when his earring was put in place that first night, "now you are a gypsy. Never forget that. You are Rama the gypsy." (9-10)

The examples from the literature given above have all been taken from books my own children have brought home from their school library. They have become accustomed to sometimes prejudicial comments about Gypsies from their teachers, who were until recently unaware of their ethnic background, and reports of these, together with the books they would bring home from their library, eventually prompted a letter to the principal. The response was revealing:

Personally, I feel that the terms 'gypsy' and 'Romani' conjure up completely different mental images in the minds of most people, the 'gypsy' being the person of fabled stories and the 'Romani' being that of an actual ethnic group.

In subsequent meetings with that principal and with my children's teachers, it was made clear that no malice had been intended, and that what lay at the root of the situation was simply an ignorance of the real situation. But those books remain on the library shelves. Ronald Lee, Canadian representative of the International Romani Union, wrote of another, obviously literature-based, attitude encountered in one Canadian school by two Romani pupils, which led to their actually being denied their ethnic identity because they did not conform to their teacher's preconception:

In Montreal, two young Kalderash girls told me that at school, when their teacher asked them their ethnic origin, they said 'Gypsy.' The teacher asked them if they lived in a caravan. When they said they lived in a house in an affluent area of the city, the teacher then told them that they couldn't be Gypsies, because Gypsies "travel around in caravans." She then told them that they were "Canadians, like everybody else." (Lee)

To their credit, a number of publishers, including Harper & Row Junior Books and World Book, Inc., have agreed to delete all ethnically defamatory references to Gypsies from future editions; in a number of instances, the authors themselves have written to apologize. Parker Brothers, who produced the card-game "Beggars and Thieves" which bore a Gypsy character on the packaging, was prompt to offer an apology and withdraw the product from the market to be redesigned. Others, like the Berkeley Publishing Group, have ignored all attempts made by the Ann Arbor-based Romani Anti-Defamation

League to communicate with them, while other children-oriented companies which exploit the Gypsy stereotype in their products, such as the U.S. Playing Card Co. ("Gypsy Witch"), have responded but have taken no action, this last refusing to do so on the grounds that the game is popular and sells well.

Our prejudices start being formed early in life, and in large part derive from how human groups are represented in the media and in the literature to which we begin to be exposed as children. This continues into later years, and the treatment of Romani characters in many of the books designed for teenage readers simply rehashes the stereotype for this older audience. In the past eighteen months, four such works of fantasy have appeared: Norman Spinrad's *Child of Fortune*, about a roaming band of "Gypsy Jokers" whom one can join by crossing their palms with a coin, and who are known also as "Rom," "Gypsies," "Freaks," "Wayfarers," "Tinkers," etc., and who travel the planets practicing trickery; Stephen King's *Thinner*, a work dealing with black magic cast by Gypsies, who are very unflatteringly described, and whose language in the book is Swedish, although the author calls it "Romany"; Charles de Lint's *Mulengro*, containing composite and unreal Gypsy characters concocted from a number of recognizable sources, though principally from the works of George Borrow; and Robert Silverberg's *Star of Gypsies*, about the "Gypsies or Rom, refugees from the Planet Romany Star . . . restless wanderers by nature." The notion that Gypsies originated on another planet was first proposed in the seventeenth century, and it is alive and well in twentieth-century children's literature.

The persona of the literary Gypsy has also spilled over into advertising aimed at children: both Kellogg's and General Mills are currently running cereal advertisements between the after-school cartoons, each depicting Gypsies with crystal balls, the latter in a ghoulish context with vampires and other characters promoting the "Count Chocula" image.

Practically the only information about Gypsies reaches school-children via television and the kind of prose described here; no formal treatment of the population is included in any American history or ethnic studies programs, although Gypsies have been in North America longer, are greater in number, and demonstrate far greater ethnic cohesion than many other American minorities. It is hardly to be wondered at that such false and negative attitudes continue to exist. There is, however, a growing body of writing which deals with the treatment of the Gypsy in children's works of fiction such as those by

Stevens, Binns, Kenrick, and Patterson, and properly researched books and articles dealing with Gypsies as ethnic populations are beginning to appear (see, for example, Acton). Perhaps most significant is the emergence of well-researched works of fiction which present Gypsies as real people, some of which are discussed in Hancock ("Gypsies in our School Libraries") and of literature by Gypsy children themselves² which, more than any other, will make Romani Americans become real people for those who read about them.

Among earlier works which present Gypsies in more realistic light may be included Natalie Savage Carlson's *The Family Under the Bridge* (1968). While the plot includes accusations of theft, and has non-Gypsy children planning to "become" Gypsies simply by acting like them, it is one of very few such novels by an American author which deals with Gypsies in a sympathetic and mainly positive way. But the setting is in Europe, not America, as though Gypsies are not a part of the contemporary scene in this country. This is also true for a more recent American novel, *Gypsy Gold*, by Valerie Worth (1983), which is inoffensive and romantic reading, but far removed from any actual situation that might be likely to happen. The setting for *Madeline and the Gypsies*, by Ludwig Bemelmans (1981) is also in Europe. Another work relating to Gypsies recently published in this country is a reprint of a collection of Romani folktales collected by Sampson at the turn of the century (1984). Authors in the United States have still to bridge the gap between romantic Gypsy fiction and fact-based Gypsy fiction, and those seeking the latter must continue to be contented with material coming out of the British Isles. Rumer Godden's *The Diddakoi* (1984), for example, deals with the problems a Diddakoi (i.e., a half-Gypsy, half-white) child encounters at school; Olga Sinclair's *Gypsy Girl* (1981) is a semi-documentary novel about the day-to-day life of a Romani girl in England. Non-fictional books dealing with the same topic, beautifully illustrated and in a format designed for young children, are José Patterson's *Traveller Child* (1985) and Mary Waterson's *Gypsy Family* (1978). Like the collection of folktales published here, a similar anthology of Russian Gypsy stories appeared in 1986 in Britain (Druts and Gessler). While not part of the English literary tradition, books for children in the Romani language also deserve mention here, since they are representative of the growing body of literature by Gypsies for Gypsies. Most such works come from Yugoslavia and Scandinavia, especially Sweden; Jakowicz' *O Thari thaj e Zerfi* (1981) is a story of two sweethearts written for teenagers in verse with striking illustrations; *Naj ande tu*

rat, Ardom? by Gunilla Bergström (1982) and *Kana o Emil sas te cirdel la Linako dand* by Lindgren and Berg (1982) are both originally Swedish children's stories translated by Wasyl Curylo into Vlax Romani. Both are beautifully produced, but make no concession to Romani life or cultural values, and in fact contain episodes Gypsy children are likely to find objectionable in terms of Romani tradition.

The centuries-old Romani presence in the United States and Canada is making itself felt more and more. As media coverage of Romani issues increases, realization is growing that the real Romani American population differs considerably from the literary Gypsy, and the need for factual, rather than romanticized, literature is growing along with it.

Notes

¹ In British literature this wagon is called a "caravan," while in American works on Gypsies, the same word applies to an entire train of wagons.

² The National Gypsy Education Council has published a number of anthologies of original writings by Gypsy children, and offers a prize for the most outstanding. It has recently published in *Traveller Education* essays and stories by American Romani children. In France, the annually-awarded *Prix Littéraire Tsigane* was established three years ago to encourage and reward literary efforts by Gypsies. Books and other materials on Gypsies in education and the education of Gypsies, as well as on all other Gypsy-related topics, may be ordered through Romanestan Publications, 22 Northend, Warley, Brentwood, Essex CM14 5LA, England.

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